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Rogozin Would Make an Excellent President

By Vladimir Frolov

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President Dmitry Medvedev, in a signal that he views missile defense talks with NATO as his top foreign policy priority, appointed Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's representative to NATO, as his special envoy for missile defense.

The president chose wisely. Rogozin is the right man for the job.

I know this from personal experience. I spent 2002 working as Rogozin's senior adviser when he was appointed by then-President Vladimir Putin as his representative for talks with the European Union on the issue of visa-free transit for Russian citizens in Kaliningrad to travel to the rest of Russia.

In May 2003, Lithuania and Poland, as part of their plans to join the EU, required Russian citizens to acquire visas to travel to and from Kaliningrad to Russia. Our job was to negotiate a travel regime that would eschew visas for Russian nationals traveling from one part of Russia

to another through EU territory.

At the time, it was a mission impossible.

Rogozin's appointment was met with skepticism both in the EU and in Moscow. After all, how could this hard-line nationalist with a penchant for undiplomatic language negotiate with the democratic EU states on a sensitive and complex issue like the EU visa regime?

For all his political flamboyance, Rogozin proved to be a skillful negotiator, driving a hard bargain when needed. He was pragmatic and willing to accommodate the other side's legitimate concerns without ceding ground on the core issue: the right of Russians to travel to Kaliningrad without visas.

He showed an ability to seize on big ideas when we proposed that Putin call for a visa-free travel for Russian citizens to the EU. I am happy to see our visa-free initiative, originally a bargaining chip in talks on Kaliningrad, take a life of its own and become one of the pillars of the country's foreign policy.

The result was a big win for Russia and Rogozin. All it takes now for a Russian to travel to Kaliningrad from other parts of the country is to purchase a railway ticket.

Rogozin is credible presidential material, a natural leader who derives his energy from engaging with people. But his time may not come before 2018.

For now he will concentrate on his next mission impossible: getting NATO and the United States to give Russia a say in how their missile defenses would operate.

This will keep Rogozin safely out of Russian politics in 2011 and 2012.

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